

Executive Summary

Reading First is a federal initiative authorized by the amendments to Title I, Part B, Subpart 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act through the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001. The ultimate purpose of the Act is to ensure that all children read at grade level by the end of third grade. In support of this goal, funds are provided to states to support comprehensive programs to improve reading instruction at selected Reading First schools as well as more broadly in the state.

The state of Montana was awarded a Reading First grant in 2003 and in turn funded 20 schools that began program implementation in January 2004. These schools agreed to specific program requirements which included:

- Selection and implementation of research-based core reading program materials.
- Selection and implementation of research-based reading interventions.
- Attendance of all K-3 staff members at a summer reading institute.
- Hiring of a full-time reading coach to provide mentoring, coaching, training, and demonstration lessons.
- Creation of a Reading Leadership Team (RLT) to guide the design of a K-3 reading delivery system.
- Attendance of reading coaches and principals at bimonthly trainings.
- Use of approved valid and reliable assessments, analyses of results and use of data to make reading improvement decisions.

The Year 1 report summarizes information collected and analyzed by the project's external evaluator, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The report includes descriptions of project activities from August 2003 through August 2004, achievement results at baseline (winter 2004) as well as preliminary outcomes approximately four months into program implementation (spring 2004). The report also includes findings from a baseline survey completed by teachers, principals, and K-3 reading staff members from participating Reading First schools.

August 2003 – August 2004 Project Activities

The Office of Public Instruction (OPI) conducted an extensive application and selection process from August to December 2003. Applications were systematically reviewed and 17 schools were selected for grants in December 2003. An additional three schools received grants in June 2004. The following activities are described in the report:

- Leadership training for all principals and reading coaches.
- Assessment training and administration of the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) in winter and spring.
- A four-day summer institute for all K-3 staff members, principals, reading coaches, and relevant district staff members.
- A kindergarten reading academy open to kindergarten teachers from all Montana elementary schools.
- Technical assistance and support to schools from OPI Reading First specialists.
- School-level professional development, including mandatory study groups and materials available through the digital learning software system, Knowledge Box.

Baseline Survey Results

Baseline surveys were administered to teachers, principals, and reading coaches to capture participants' prior experience with reading-based professional development, instructional practices, staff collaboration, school leadership, use of assessment data, and attitudes about reading instruction. Highlights include:

- Schools that were formerly part of the Montana Reading Excellence Act (REA) grant had higher levels of self-reported implementation of many Reading First components at baseline than schools that were not formerly part of REA. Specifically, REA schools were more likely than non-REA schools to already have: a better understanding of grant expectations; established collaborative structures such as grade-level meetings; implemented a 90-minute reading block; more experience with assessment; more knowledgeable leaders; and greater teacher self-confidence about their level of preparation to meet students' needs in the five essential components.
- Baseline measures suggest that although there are some structures in place that support reading, there is room for Reading First to strengthen reading programs in participating schools. This may include: strengthening assessment systems and communication structures, increasing the use of classroom observations by

principals and peers, strengthening explicit instruction in the five essential components, and providing ongoing professional development in reading.

- Six months into the grant (summer 2004), principals were viewed by staff members as visible advocates for reading, and coaches were viewed as knowledgeable reading resources. Coaches also reported that they were comfortable in their roles as coaches.
- There was strong support for Reading First among participants, with over three-fourths of teachers indicating support for the instructional changes associated with Reading First. Levels of support were not different between former REA and non-REA schools.

Assessment Results

- The DIBELS was administered twice in Year 1: winter 2004 and spring 2004. Winter 2004 data serve as a baseline measure of student performance prior to the impact of any instructional changes associated with the Reading First grant. Spring 2004 data reflect the impact of approximately four months of implementation.
- At baseline in winter 2004, 38.2 percent of kindergarten students, 47.4 percent of first-grade students, 58.1 percent of second-grade students, and 41.6 percent of third-grade students were at benchmark.
- Between winter and spring, there were large gains in the percentage of students at benchmark in kindergarten, moderate gains in first grade, negative trends in second grade, and little change in third grade.
- There are multiple possible explanations for the decline in the percentage of second-grade students at benchmark over the first four months of Montana Reading First. This should be an area of concern for state staff and, pending additional data, warrants further consideration from evaluators.
- There were greater successes moving students to benchmark from the “strategic” group than to benchmark from the “intensive” group.
- Retention rates, or the percentage of students who were retained at benchmark between the winter and spring, were moderate (82.4%) to strong (94.5%). The earlier grades (kindergarten and first) were more successful at retaining students at benchmark than the later grades (second and third).
- At baseline, there was a larger percentage of students from former REA schools at benchmark, compared to non-REA schools. However, the change in both groups during the first four months of implementation was similar.

- Students within certain subgroups (notably Native American students and students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) were consistently less likely to achieve benchmark at baseline and/or make gains during the first four months of implementation than others.
- Baseline data reinforce that schools began the Reading First grant at very different places. Likewise, there was a great deal of variation in growth patterns over the first four months of implementation.

Please refer to the end of this report for recommendations.